SPORT

Platini says Infantino has become 'more of an autocrat'

LONDON: Former UEFA boss Michel Platini says FIFA president Gianni Infantino "has become more of an autocrat" and is too interested in the rich and powerful, in an interview with *The Guardian* on Thursday.

Infantino was Platini's deputy from 2009 and 2015 when the Frenchman headed European football's governing body.

"He was a good number two, but is not a good number one," Platini said of Infantino. "He worked very well at UEFA but he has one problem: he likes the rich and powerful people, the ones with money. It's his character.

"He was like that as a number two, but back then he was not the boss. Unfortunately Infantino has become more of an autocrat since the pandemic," he said.

Ahead of the 2026 World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico, Infantino has cultivated a close relationship with US President Donald Trump and created a special FIFA peace prize that he awarded him at the draw for the tournament in December.

The Swiss-Italian lawyer took over from the scandal-hit Sepp Blatter in 2016, but Platini believes Infantino's top-down leadership has made FIFA a less democratic organisation than it was in Blatter's day.

"There is less democracy than in Blatter's time. You can say what you want about Blatter, but his main problem is that he wanted to continue at FIFA for life. He was a good person for football," Platini told *The Guardian*.

"The administrators in football now, they are just doing their job. You find many who wouldn't care whether it's football or basketball. It's not always a case of loving football if you work at UEFA or FIFA."

Platini has been a vocal critic of Infantino and his close circle for several years, accusing him of thwarting the former French playing great's bid to become FIFA president by tipping off Swiss prosecutors about an undocumented payment from Blatter to Platini of two million Swiss francs ($2.5 million).—AFP

COMO: Adrien Rabiot (second R) of AC Milan shoots to score against Como during their Serie A match at Stadio Giuseppe Sinigaglia.—Reuters

Rabiot double lifts Milan after early scare at Como

COMO: AC Milan came from behind to earn a 3-1 victory at Como on Thursday, with Adrien Rabiot scoring twice to keep the away side in the Serie A title race.

Milan are second in the standings on 43 points, three behind rivals Inter Milan and three clear of Napoli in third, while Como are sixth with 34 points.

Como made the brighter start and took the lead after 10 minutes when Marc-Oliver Kempf rose to head home a corner.

Despite the hosts controlling much of the first half, Milan struck in stoppage time as Christopher Nkunku calmly converted from the penalty spot after Kempf was penalised for pushing Rabiot.

Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan produced a series of strong saves to keep Como at bay after the break before Milan took the lead in the 55th minute when Rabiot knocked the ball in from close range.

Como were denied an equaliser as Nico Paz saw his effort from outside the box crash against the crossbar. Milan then sealed the win two minutes from time when Rabiot caught the Como defence off guard with a low strike from distance that crept into the bottom corner.

"This was a team victory, we showed our mentality," Rabiot told DAZN after being named man-of-the-match.

"We suffered a lot in the first half, but we talked during the break, came out with a different mentality, we all came out fighting for the three points.

"We gave something extra and I am very happy to score two goals, obviously, but above all I'm pleased with the mentality of the team."

While Rabiot provided the goals, another Frenchman, goalkeeper Maignan, made his mark with a string of crucial saves.

"We knew that playing here would be difficult, we were well-prepared. We started a little sluggish and they scored, but we managed to keep the game open, and then all together started to play as a team," Maignan said.

"We know these are great nights for Milan with an atmosphere like this. We suffered, we used up a lot of energy and left it all on the field."

Thursday's win was huge for the title race, with the top three all having now played their games in hand accrued from taking part in the Italian Super Cup in Saudi Arabia.

But Milan could have easily been three goals behind before Nkunku thumped home his spot-kick had it not been for goalkeeper Maignan, whose saves allowed the away side to pick Como's pocket.

Moments before Rabiot won Milan's penalty — helped by an acrobatic tumble — Maignan pulled off the best of his six saves, keeping out Lucas Da Cunha's header from point-blank range and leaving the midfielder baffled as to how he didn't score.

And Paz was exasperated when Maignan got his finger tips to the Argentina youngster's powerful low drive, a save which preceded Rabiot's first arrowed strike by moments.

Paz also clipped the crossbar on the hour mark as Como continued in vein to push for what would have been a deserved equaliser, but with the clock ticking down Rabiot ended the discussion by clouting a long-range effort past Como goalkeeper Jean Butez — another Frenchman.

Earlier, Bologna snapped a seven-match winless streak with an eventful 3-2 win at Verona who sink to the bottom of the table following an 11th defeat of the season.

Riccardo Orsolini, Jens Odgaard and Santiago Castro all scored fine goals as Bologna, who lost the Super Cup final to Napoli, moved up to eighth and four points behind Como who sit in the Conference League spot.—Agencies

Verstappen motivated as Red Bull brace for F1 changes

DETROIT: Four-time world champion Max Verstappen said he's keen to get to grips with the new car Red Bull unveiled on Thursday for a 2026 Formula One season of massive change.

The team unveiled the livery for their new cars before a few hundred guests at Detroit's Michigan Central Station less than two months before the season opens in Melbourne on March 7.

New rules for 2026 see aerodynamic changes to make cars lighter and smaller along with modifications to engine specifications to make for a greater contribution from electric power in the hybrid units.

"There is a lot of unknown, there are big changes in the engine, in the car," Verstappen said. "Initially I'll take time to adjust during test days.

The motivation is very high. It always takes a bit of time to get used to things," he added. "You need to understand where the most performance is to be found, get comfortable in the car. Also with the new engine now as well, that will take a bit of time."

Red Bull, which has previously relied on Honda engines, took the gamble in 2023 of developing its own engine for 2026 in partnership with automotive giant Ford, which will return to F1 22 years after its departure.

Verstappen's run of four straight world titles ended in 2025 as McLaren's Lando Norris claimed the prize. But despite an inferior car the Dutch driver battled back from a massive deficit in the standings to challenge for the title, snatching eight wins — more than either Norris or teammate Oscar Piastri.

This year Verstappen will be joined by French driver Isack Hadjar, promoted to the team's Number 2 seat after a successful rookie season with Racing Bulls.

Hadjar was also on hand for Thursday's splashy big reveal, as was Red Bull boss Laurent Mekies, who said the sweeping regulatory changes and a new engine would make for a steep learning curve.

"I think it would simply be naive of us to think we could build our engine from scratch... and be more competitive right from the start than people who've been doing it for 95 years," he said.—AFP

KRL take solid lead against SBP

KARACHI: Khan Research Laboratories (KRL) extended their dominance over the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) on the second day of their President's Trophy fourth-round match with a substantial first-innings lead at the SBP Sports Complex.

KRL were 365-8 at the close of play in their first innings — 259 runs ahead of SBP as Waqar Ahmed and Sarmad Bhatti smashed gritty centuries and in the process added 129 runs for the fifth wicket after they got together at 158-4.

Waqar (138) smashed his seventh first-class century that contained 17 fours while Sarmad remained unbeaten on 100 at the close having hit 10 fours. For SBP, Niaz Khan picked up three wickets while Rameez Aziz and Shahid Aziz dismissed two batters each.

Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) and Sahir Associates played out a grinding day at the KCCA Stadium as the former managed 220-6 in their first innings at the close of play on day two, trailing the latter by another 28 runs.

Opener Umar Siddiq led the way for OGDCL with a dogged 79 after putting on an 86-run opening stand with Israrullah (30). No.3 batter Haroon Arshad scored 23.

Sahir Associates made inroads with five quick wickets as OGDCL went from 125-1 to 166-6 before Danish Aziz (43 not out) and Asif Afridi (22 not out) steered them out of trouble with an unbeaten 54-run stand.

For Sahir Associates, Rewayat Khan and Hafiz Mohammad Suleman returned identical figures of three for 56.

Earlier, Sahir resumed from the overnight score of 245-8 and could only add three runs to their total as Asif finished with seven for 73 in 36 overs — his best bowling figures in a first-class innings.

At the National Bank Stadium, Pakistan Television (PTV) were struggling at 99-5 in their second innings after conceding a 72-run deficit against the Sui Norther Gas Pipelines Limited (SNGPL).

PTV's Mohammad Taha was unbeaten on 25 at close while Mohammad Suleman fell for 25. SNGPL's Shehzad Gul (2-23), Shahnawaz Dahani (2-38) and Sajid Khan (1-23) were vital in keeping PTV's second-innings lead to 27.

Earlier, SNGPL resumed their first innings from 58-3 and were bowled out for 238 with Saifullah Bangash (71) and Sajid Khan (34) staging a late 65-run resistance for the ninth wicket.

For PTV, Ali Usman picked up four wickets, while Amad Butt and Israr Hussain bagged three each.

Ghani Glass were leading Wapda by 85 runs in the second innings after they closed day two with 166-2 on the board at the UBL Sports Complex.

Openers Khawaja Arham (68) and Kashif Ali (53) did well to erase the 81-run first innings deficit with a 107-run stand at the top. Mohsin Riaz (22 not out) and Tayyab Tahir (21 not out) were unbeaten on the crease.

Earlier, Wapda were bowled out for 223 after resuming from overnight score of 129-4, in reply to Ghani Glass' 142 all out in first innings. Ayaz Tasawar converted his overnight 42 not out to 78.

Ghani Glass' skipper Noman Ali bagged his 35th first-class five-for returning impressive figures of 7-59, while leg-spinner Mohammad Rameez Jr dismissed two batters.—Sports Reporter

Zaib fires record 139 break at national snooker

KARACHI: Zaib Khan crafted a magnificent 139 break, the new highest of the championship, highlighting a penultimate day of group stage drama at the 50th National Snooker Championship here at the NBP Sports Complex on Friday.

Zaib's record clearance came in the fifth frame for Balochistan against Punjab's Mubashir Raza. Despite the stunning effort, Zaib lost the match 4-2, but his break eclipsed the previous tournament best of 134 set by veteran Mohammad Asif.

In a crucial group encounter, young sensation Hasnain Akhtar suffered his first loss, falling 4-3 to compatriot Ali Hamza in a tense battle.

Hamza rallied from 3-1 down, sealing the decider with a 75 break. The result throws their group's qualification race open heading into the final round.

Elsewhere, Punjab's Rana Irfan produced a masterclass, firing two century breaks of 122 and 137 in a dominant 4-0 win over Sultan Muhammad.

Kamran Albert also made a 120 break in his 4-2 victory over Haris Khan, while Asif Toba compiled a 104 in a 4-1 win against Nadir Shah.

The dismal tournament for fifth seed Mohammad Naseem Akhtar continued with a walkover loss to Ghulam Abbas, marking his third defeat.

In other key matches, 2022 world champion Ahsan Ramzan solidified his knockout claim with a 4-2 win over Ali Raza.

Ahmar Tariq scored an important 4-2 victory over former high-break holder A. Sattar, while Sohail Shehzad defeated the in-form Shan Namat 4-0.

Close contests defined the day. Mohammad Shahbaz edged Awaisullah Munir 4-3 in a match featuring a 97 break from Awaisullah.

Mohammad Abdullah defeated Sheikh Mohammad Mudassir 4-3 and Amir Sohail secured a 4-2 victory over Ian Mark John.

Zulfiqar A. Qadir registered a 4-0 win over Shahzaib Rafique and Mohammad Ahmad defeated Saif Ali Khan 4-1.

Further results saw Hasnain Siyab beat Asad Kan 4-2, completing the day's schedule.

The group stage concludes on Saturday, determining the 24 players who will advance to the knockout phase beginning this weekend. The top two finishers from each of the 12 groups will progress, with the top eight qualifiers receiving a bye to the pre-quarterfinals.—Sports Reporter

Barca edge Racing Santander to reach Copa del Rey quarters

BARCELONA: Ferran Torres and Lamine Yamal fired Barcelona to a 2-0 win over Racing Santander and into the Copa del Rey quarter-finals on Thursday.

The Spanish internationals' strikes helped holders Barca defeat second division leaders Racing to progress from a surprisingly tight last 16 clash and record an 11th consecutive victory across all competitions.

The hosts had two goals disallowed for offside and record 32-time winners Barca did just enough to claim victory.

"We didn't think they would be so hard to break down," admitted Torres to Movistar. "We knew that we had to stretch the game, be calm and in the end it went well."

Before kickoff, Racing players did a guard of honor for the Spanish Super Cup champions, lining up to salute the Barcelona players as they entered the field.

Barcelona join Athletic Bilbao, Deportivo Alaves, Albacete, Atletico Madrid, Real Betis, Real Sociedad and Valencia in the last eight. The Spanish FA will conduct the quarter-final draw on Monday, with ties scheduled for Feb 3-5.

The Copa final will be played in Sevilla on April 25.

Having seen Real Madrid eliminated at second-tier Albacete on Wednesday Barca coach Hansi Flick named a fairly strong side, including teenage star Yamal.

After a 15 minute delay with some fans stuck outside, the match kicked off at Racing's Sardinero stadium, and Barca quickly took control of the ball.

The Catalans struggled to turn possession into a meaningful opening though, and when they finally did Dani Olmo missed his kick from Marcus Rashford's dangerous cross.

Racing looked to breach Barcelona's high defensive line but when they did get in behind the visitors managed to mop up well.

Giorgi Guliashvili's low effort from range was fielded comfortably by Joan Garcia, and that was as close as the hosts came.

Barcelona continued to push forward in the second half and Rashford had a shot tipped away and also drilled narrowly wide.

Eventually the Spanish champions took the lead through Torres, after Fermin Lopez sent him through on goal. The Spain international rounded Racing goalkeeper Jokin Ezkieta and rolled home.

The hosts were forced on the offensive and twice had the ball in Barcelona's net, but both of Manex Lozano's goals were ruled out for offside.

Barca goalkeeper Garcia made a superb save to thwart Lozano one-on-one deep in stoppage time and avoid the game going to extra-time.

Barca wrapped up their win with the last kick of the match, Yamal tapping in Raphinha's cross at the back post.

"We played the game we had to play, we played a 10 out of 10 match, [with] two offside goals and the chance at the end... it's okay, it's football," said Racing defender Alvaro Mantilla.

Elsewhere Valencia won 2-0 at Burgos to reach the last eight.—Agencies

Teens Mboko, Andreeva set for Adelaide final showdown

ADELAIDE: Two of the brightest young talents in tennis will play for the Adelaide International title after 18-year-old Mirra Andreeva and 19-year-old Victoria Mboko advanced to their first WTA 500 final on Friday.

World number eight Andreeva defeated doubles partner Diana Shnaider 6-3, 6-2 while Canadian Mboko needed just less than an hour to dispatch local favourite Kimberly Birrell 6-2, 6-1.

"Vicky, she's a great player," Andreeva said in an on-court interview. "She had an amazing season last year and I've known her since I was 12 years old.

"I think I've been playing not bad as well, so I think it's going to be a great match tomorrow."

Mboko, last year's WTA Newcomer of the Year whose first title was a WTA 1000-level event in a breakthrough season, overwhelmed Birrell after falling behind 2-1 in the first set.

There was no stopping her when she won nine straight games to surge into the lead, finishing the match with 22 winners.

"We had a lot of good exchange of rallies. I feel like I was able to kind of stay in with her in terms of pace. We had a lot of rallies where we were running a lot and trying to stay neck and neck at the baseline," she said.

"I think having those kinds of rallies and points can help me in other matches when it comes to those points. I think it just gives me a confidence overall."

In Hobart, Saturday's final will be contested by American Iva Jovic and Italian Elisabetta Cocciaretto.

Sebastian Baez and Jakub Mensik will contest the ASB Classic final in Auckland after both players navigated a challenging rain-interrupted schedule.

Argentina's Baez completed a remarkable double-header, first wrapping up a 7-5, 6-3 quarter-final victory over top seed Ben Shelton that had been suspended on Thursday due to rain, then immediately defeating Marcos Giron 6-1, 6-4 in the semi-final.

Czech player Mensik also had to play twice, first beating Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard 6-4, 6-2 in his quarter-final before defeating Fabian Marozsan 7-6(9), 4-6, 6-1 in the semi-final.

"Obviously it was a tough two days," Mensik said. "Yesterday, I was waiting the whole day and like am I going to play or not? I spent all day here, every 30 minutes it was changing, raining, not raining.

"I came today feeling a little bit tired, but I pushed myself and showed really great tennis today. So I'm really grateful that before the (Australian Open) Grand Slam, the form is going up."—Reuters

RUSSIA'S Mirra Andreeva hits a return to compatriot Diana Shnaider during the final of the Adelaide International on Friday.—AFP